

## URGENT DECENTRALIZATION PROBLEMS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AT A REGIONAL LEVEL: POLITICAL, ADMINISTRATIVE AND SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** *This article proposes a comparative analysis of the modern Czech decentralization model and its institutional peculiarities. The author explores, in a comparative context, administrative-territorial features of local municipalities, consistent patterns of local budgeting, and the fragmentation of the political and party systems in the Czech Republic. The article provides expert findings with regard to contemporary problems with decentralization. On the basis of a wealth of empirical evidence (verified statistics and the findings of an expert sociological survey), the author draws conclusions on the efficiency of the contemporary Czech decentralization model. The article discusses the idea that, through the lens of political issues, numerous confrontations arise in Regional Assemblies between the two key-players (ANO-2011 and ČSSD). The author outlines the substantial dependence of local budgets on state subventions that comprise up to 35–43% of the total budget. The sociological survey conducted in May 2017 suggests that the majority of decentralization problems occur due to uneven economic growth in regions, as well as insufficient political influence upon decentralization processes, as the efficiency of the present decentralization model does not rise above 60%. The results of the study's findings on the problems with and prospects of decentralization, as well as positive or negative experiences with decentralization in the Czech Republic, may be applicable for similar institutionalization problems in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.*

**Keywords:** *Czech decentralization model; political fragmentation of Regional Assemblies; local budgets allocation, administrative and political decentralization levels.*

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**Raktiniai žodžiai:** *Čekijos decentralizacijos modelis; politinė regioninių asamblėjų fragmentacija; vietos biudžetų paskirstymas, administracinis ir politinis decentralizacijos lygiai.*

## Introduction

The present study is aimed at outlining the key problematic issues in decentralization processes in the Czech Republic, particularly at the highest level of local self-government, i.e. the level of regions. The research hypothesis is based on proving the fact that the Czech Republic has been one of the leaders in the development of territorial democracy in its respective region. Exploring its positive experience of decentralization, especially the political and administrative aspects, would be a useful experience to borrow from for post-socialist countries, particularly in the light of extending the autonomy of territorial communities.

The problems of structure and performance in the decentralization model developed have remained among the central research directions in both Czech and international academic scope. General issues of power decentralization in the Czech Republic at the level of regions have been investigated by Kopečský (2010), Illner (2011), and Hemming (2006). Specific theoretical and practical issues of decentralization optimization in the Czech Republic have been discussed by Cibáková and Malý (2009), and Ochrava and Půček (2011). Kruntorádová and Jůptner (2012) suggested an in-depth analysis of the tools for financial independence employed by municipalities, against the background of regional political conjuncture.

One should not overlook Eurointegration amongst the crucial factors, having contributed to the intensification of decentralisation processes in the Czech Republic. Undoubtedly, rapprochement of the Czech Republic with EU public administration required improvements in the scope of local fiscal policy. R. Jahoda, J. Pekova, and J. Selesovky (2003) argue that it is of primary importance to extend the administrative competences of territorial communities in the scope of their own revenue allocation. On the other hand, the extended fiscal autonomy of territorial communities will not be able to institutionally fill local budgets due to the lack of effective political and public control. Moreover, the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union failed to result in an immediate positive dynamic in terms of regional decentralization. According to M. Baun and D. Marek (2006), a centralized approach to the allocation of European financial funds has remained a problematic one.

It should be noted, however, that institutional decentralization lies, above all, in the system of delegation of managerial competences from the centre to the regions. In this light, the mechanism of filling local budgets is important along with the degree of dependence of regions on public transfers (Hamerniková 2000). Even given the effective implementation of both administrative decentralization and decentralization reforms owing to the broad fiscal autonomy of the regions, a considerable amount of local tax autonomy remains relevant. As a result, this leads to an uneven allocation of revenues and expenditures in the fiscal policy of the region (Jílek 2009).

An effective system of governance at the local level remains one of the most problematic segments the post-socialist country faces in the course of democratic transformation. A country can achieve a consolidated democratic regime in the scope of politics and public administration reforms, yet local governance reforms require greater efficiency. In fact, decentralization of governance (including increased financial autonomy in the regions) has continuously been a ‘catch-up reform’ that requires the streamlining of processes in three areas: political (consolidation of party and political environment in the regions), administrative (implementing effective administrative-territorial reform), and fiscal (expanding fiscal autonomy in regions and reducing the weight of state transfers in local budgets).

### Methodology & data

We conducted the respective data analysis at two methodological levels:

1. The chronological level – at this stage we monitored decentralization processes in their dynamics (in the course of transformation)
2. The comparative level – at this point we employed comparative analysis of the structural components of the decentralization process in order to point out the general direction of the decentralization system.

This method of analysis requires contemplation of certain components of decentralization in the Czech Republic at two levels:

1. The political level, involving a comparative analysis of the local political and party environment on the example of the latest Regional Assemblies elections (legislation on local elections, the results of 2014–2016 electoral processes at a regional level).
2. The administrative level, involving (a) territorial division (legislation on local communities, the structure and entities of administrative-territorial division, and the administrative status of Prague, kraj – region), and (b) local self-government (territorial communities, the level of financial independence of the communities, and the peculiarities of regional budgets’ formation and allocation).

Our study is reinforced by the following sources of information: a) data on the number of administrative districts and municipalities in December 2015 (Czech Statistical Office, n.d.), b) microeconomic indicators on local budgeting in particular regions during 2013–2015 (Czech Statistical Office, n.d.), c) electoral data about specific political parties’ representation at the latest 2014–2016 Elections to Regional Assemblies, (Czech Statistical Office, n.d.), and d) the findings of a 2017 sociological survey (own research)<sup>2</sup>.

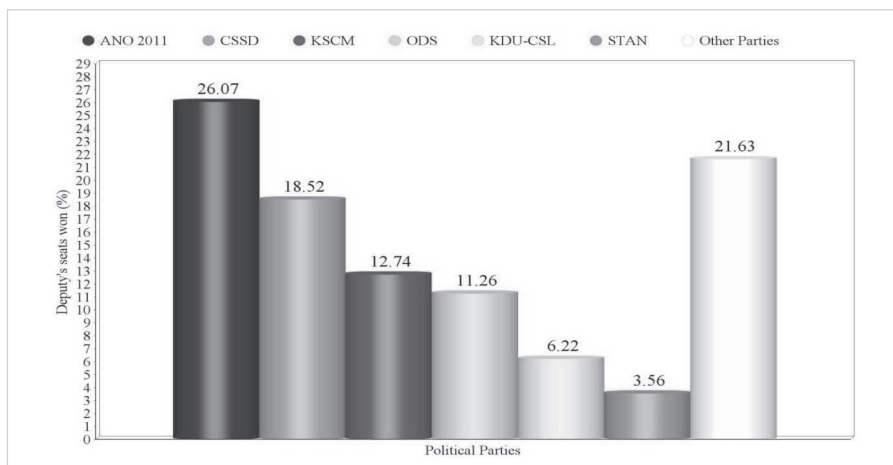
2 We conducted a qualitative survey, the methodology of which involved sending questionnaires to experts involved in administrative processes at a regional level. The survey time framework was 8–22 May 2017. The respondents were selected according to their affiliation to local administration bodies. We received 9 completed questionnaires in total, representing mostly Eastern, Central, and Western parts of the Czech Republic: a) Karlovy Vary Region (1), b) Vysočina Region (4), c) Olomouc Region (1), d) Moravian-Silesian Region (1), e) Zlín Region (1) and (f) Prague (1). According to the professional indicator these proved to be: a) regional Government members (6), b) public servants in the departments of: education (1), legal sector (1), and architecture (engineering) (1).

## The political dimension of decentralization – the division of political and party space at a Regional level

Elections to local councils in the Czech Republic are held every 4 years in particular election constituencies according to the existing administrative division. Conventionally, local elections are held on two levels: 1) higher – formed of 13 Regional Assemblies (plus the Prague Assembly), 2) lower – elections to Municipal Assemblies, cities, villages, statutory cities (26), district councils, and city districts.

At a higher level of municipal elections (to Regional Assemblies), 5 election campaigns were held from 2000 to 2016. The latest elections to Regional Assemblies took place in the autumn of 2016 (7–8 October 2016).

According to the results of the latest elections, one cannot but mention that political and party space is characterised by a moderate multiparty system. The main competition occurs between 5–6 political forces, with overall party representation being 23 political parties and party coalitions.



**Figure 1. The division of deputy's seats in the Regional Assemblies in accordance with the party affiliation (2016–2020)**

*Source: Author's calculations on the basis of the findings, provided by Czech Statistical Office (n.d.)*

In the political and ideological context, the main contest is held between:

a) right-wing parties: Civic Democratic Party (Czech – ODS); KDU-ČSL; STAN;

b) centrist parties: ANO-2011;

c) left-wing parties: Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD); Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM).

In a comparative sense, one can observe the slight dominance of ANO 2011; more than 50% of available seats in Regional Assemblies were won by the other 5 political parties: ČSSD, KSČM, ODS, KDU-ČSL and STAN (Volby.cz – Český statistický úřad, n.d.).

Regional political unions/coalitions delegated their representatives to Regional Assemblies along with all-national political forces. Such political unions are established on the grounds of the principle of coalition, and are formed as independent regional agencies of existing national parties<sup>3</sup>.

The results of the latest Regional Assembly elections prove the intensification of ideological controversies across the entire country. Finally, there already exists traditional political opposition and even enmity between the key political parties, namely left-wing, right-wing, and centrist proponents.

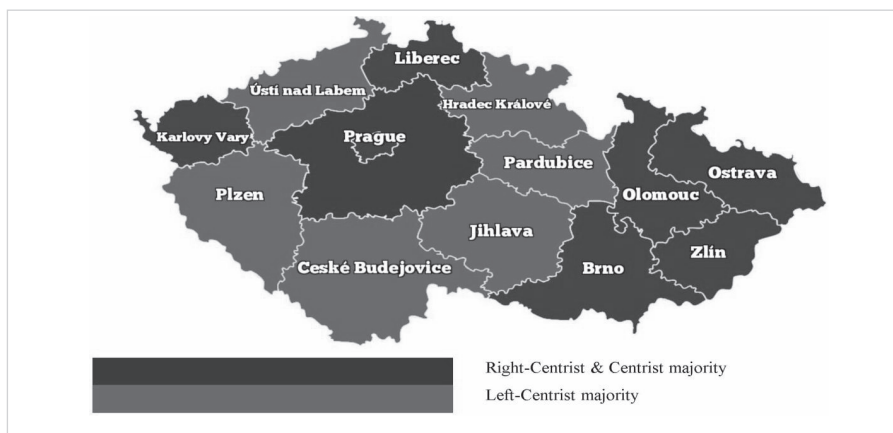


Figure 2. Illustration of Political-Party Space Fragmentation at the Level of Regional Assemblies (2014/2016 – up till present)

Source: Author's creation

The essential levels of political and party space fragmentation in the example of Regional Assemblies can be grouped as follows: a) Political and Ideological Fragmentation, b) Geographic Fragmentation, and c) Political Elite Fragmentation.

a) **Political and Ideological Fragmentation.** As a rule, the main parties competing against each other at the regional level have been the centrist ANO-2011 and the left-

3 The division of regions and regional political agencies that have obtained seats in their Assemblies: 1) **South Bohemian Region** – Jihočeši 2012, PRO JIŽNÍ ČECHY (Starostové, HOPB, TOP 09), 2) **Plzeň Region** – Koalice pro Plzeňský kraj (KDU-ČSL, Strana zelených, hnutí Nestraníci), 3) **Hradec Králové Region** – Piráti a Strana zelených + Změna pro Královéhradecký kraj, Koalice pro Královéhradecký kraj (KDU-ČSL, Hradecký demokratický klub, Volba pro město), 4) **Pardubice Region** – Koalice pro Pardubický kraj, 5) **Vysočina Region** – Starostové PRO VYSOČINU, 6) **South Moravian Region** – Starostové pro Jižní Moravu, TOP 09 + «Žít Brno», 7) **Olomouc Region** – Starostové Pro Olomoucký kraj, Koalice pro Olomoucký kraj společně se starosty.

centrist ČSSD. In the latest Regional Assembly Elections in 2016 (including the results of territorial elections to the Prague Assembly in 2014), right-centrist and centrist have illustrated obvious dominance in 8 regions, whereas left-centrists have been leaders in 6 regions.

In spite of the dominance of ANO-2011 and ČSSD, in 3 regions other political groups were observed that were able to form ruling coalitions under their leadership. This can be seen in 1) Usti Region – the dominance of KSČM, 2) Liberec Region – the dominance of Starostové pro Liberecký kraj, and 3) Zlín Region – the dominance of KDU-ČSL.

**b) Geographic Fragmentation.** In the east of the Czech Republic (most of the border with post-socialist Slovakia and Poland), right-centrist and centrist movements have been leaders in the political arena. Right-centrists also tend to dominate in the Central Bohemian Region, partly in the north (Liberec Region), and in the extreme west (Karlovy Vary Region). Left-centrists dominate in the south (the borders with Austria and Germany), and embrace the 3 central regions (Hradec Králové Region, Pardubice Region and Vysočina Region), as well as one western region (Usti Region).

**c) Political Elite Fragmentation.** At the highest level of political elite (the post of the President of the Region) there has been an obvious tendency towards 2 political parties' dominance. ANO-2011 have 6 representatives, ČSSD have 5 representatives, and all other political groups share 3 representatives.

### **Administrative dimensions of decentralisation and the institutional mechanisms of the contemporary decentralization model in the example of the Regional Assemblies**

The implementation and intensification of decentralization in the post-socialist Czech Republic was significantly affected by the remnants of the command system of governance, attended by the trajectory of democratic transformation. We can claim that the evolution of local democracy in the Czech Republic has been conditioned by two key factors: 1) the dissolution of the existing socialist state administration model, accompanied by the overall transformation of the political regime and its vector towards democracy (1990s), 2) the optimization of local public administration, caused by the vector towards Eurointegration as chosen by the country in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Given the key tendencies and the general background of democratic reform in the Czech Republic, governance processes underwent initial decentralization. Hence, the government's first and foremost option was to liberalize the economic system, a high level of which could not be achieved without an effective system of regional governance. Over the first decade of independence, several central executive bodies were established in the Czech Republic to regulate: economic and administrative processes in the regions (e.g. Ministry for Regional Development (1996) (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj ČR 2019); the network of the Regional Development Agency in regions (Regionální rozvojová agentura jižní Moravy, n.d.)<sup>4</sup>; and the approved respective legislation (Law on Region-

4 For instance, **The Regional Development Agency of South Moravia** in Brno was established in 1997. At present the Agency consists of: the South Moravian Region, the Association of Communities and Towns of

al Development Support of 2000 – Zákon o podpoře regionálního rozvoje 248/2000 Sb). The administrative-territorial reform in 2000, along with the adoption of the required legislation and the regional elections (2000–2016), was a further step in implementing decentralization reform, making amendments to the normative basis of self-government and implementing the Concept of Completion of Public Administration Reforms in 2012 (Ministerstvo vnitra 2012).

The current administrative-territorial structure of the Czech Republic is based on the 2000 reform, which points out 3 crucial levels: Region; Administrative districts of municipalities with extended powers; and Municipalities.

*Table 1. Administrative districts and Municipalities in the Czech Republic (as of 31 December 2015)*

№	Region	Administrative districts of municipalities with extended powers	Municipalities
1	Středočeský kraj	26	1,145
2	Jihočeský kraj	17	623
3	Plzeňský kraj	15	501
4	Karlovarský kraj	7	132
5	Ústecký kraj	16	354
6	Liberecký kraj	10	215
7	Královéhradecký kraj	15	448
8	Pardubický kraj	15	451
9	Kraj Vysočina	15	704
10	Jihomoravský kraj	21	673
11	Olomoucký kraj	13	399
12	Moravskoslezský kraj	22	300
13	Zlínský kraj	13	307

*Source: Regional data. Local government budgets. Czech Statistical Office (n.d.).*

A significant and impactful factor in the high decentralization level of regions is the underlying transparency principle in local budget-making, and the financial provision of regional administration with the purpose of realizing the respective socio-economic programmes. Local government budgets are formed from different sources of financing,

in the main being comprised of: Revenue of the Regional Budgets = (a) Tax revenue + (b) Non-tax revenue + (c) Capital revenue.

The largest regional budgets, which in 2013–2015 amounted to over 100 million CZK, include: Hlavní město Praha (204 million CZK), Jihomoravský kraj (142 million CZK), Středočeský kraj (141 million CZK), and Moravskoslezský kraj (138 million CZK). The regions whose budgets over the three-year period (2013–2015) were less than 50 million CZK are: Liberecký kraj (49 million CZK) and Karlovarský kraj (37 million CZK) (Czech Statistical Office, n.d.).

A significant source of income are the financial transfers from the State that include both Non-investment transfers and Investment transfers.

*Table 2. Allocation of State Transfers according to Regions (CZK million) (2013–2015)*<sup>5</sup>

Region	2013	2014	2015	TOTAL
Jihomoravský kraj	17,521	21,042	21,809	60,372
Středočeský kraj	17,552	18,910	22,866	59,328
Moravskoslezský kraj	18,287	18,839	18,824	55,950
Hlavní město Praha	17,672	18,727	19,312	55,711
Ústecký kraj	12,117	11,271	12,067	35,455
Olomoucký kraj	9,038	10,461	12,312	31,811
Jihočeský kraj	8,626	9,461	11,867	29,954
Zlínský kraj	7,791	8,945	9,890	26,626
Kraj Vysočina	7,937	8,813	9,813	26,563
Plzeňský kraj	8,548	8,585	9,247	26,380
Královéhradecký kraj	7,591	8,307	9,557	25,455
Pardubický kraj	6,985	7,706	9,403	24,094
Liberecký kraj	6,371	6,242	7,486	20,099
Karlovarský kraj	4,398	4,317	5,297	14,012

Source: "Regional data. Local government budgets." in Czech Statistical Office (n.d.)

Depending on the amount of state transfers in the regional budget, one may define the level of financial independence at the level of regional self-government.

<sup>5</sup> These research findings were partly revealed at the International Scientific Conference "Modern Maritime Technologies, Problems of Social-Economic Development and Ways for Solving Them" in Batumi, Georgia, on June 24, 2019.



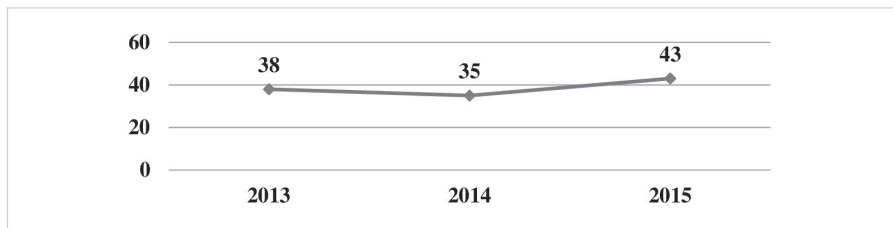


Figure 3. Specific weight of state transfers in regional budgets (%)

Source: Author's calculations on the basis of the data, provided by Czech Statistical Office (n.d.)

Based on the aforementioned patterns and trends, we can conclude that the regional budgets are highly financially dependent on public transfers. During 2013–2015, the share of state transfers in regional budgets was relatively large, constituting no less than 1/3 of all income. The tendency to enlarge state budget revenue is noticeable, in particular with the increase from 2014 to 2015 (+ 8%). According to the quota of state contribution to local budgets, it should be noted that the state influence on reallocation of local budgets is quite high, reflecting the overall financial independence of a particular region.

### **An expert sociological survey on the topical issues of decentralization in the Czech Republic**

The main objective of this research is to uncover the peculiarities, problems, and prospects of the Czech decentralization model on the basis of the empirical analysis of expert answers given by public sector administration employees. The survey questions are prepared with the intention of revealing the core problems and prospects of regional decentralization, mainly due to analysing identical decentralization processes at a national level.

*The main decentralization achievements in the Czech Republic (Questionnaire).*

Reforms in the domain of public administration in the Czech Republic by means of implementing both decentralization and regionalization eventually appeared successful. Amongst the main decentralization achievements, the majority of respondents pointed out an economic factor – ‘financial independence of the regions’.

*Effect of the structures of the EU on the decentralization processes in the Czech Republic (Questionnaire).*

In the Czech Republic, democratization has led to intensive Eurointegration processes. The Czech decentralization model became the most important element during Eurointegration and contributed to joining the EU. Currently one may observe intergovernmental interaction between the Czech Republic and the EU. Respondents selected 5 options out of the 6 suggested, the majority indicating the absence of EU influence on Czech decentralization.

*Impact of decentralization processes on the development of democracy in the Czech Republic (Questionnaire).*

Normally decentralization is identified as democratization, especially in post-socialist countries. Respondents were asked to identify the level of decentralization's effect on the evolution of democracy in the Czech Republic at their own discretion. On a scale of efficiency (0 – the least influence; 100 – the largest influence) one may position decentralization's effect on the processes of democratization. The lowest marker was 30; the highest 85; and the most frequent both 50 and 80. The average score was 62.7.

Later in the paper we will provide profound analysis of the survey findings concerning the evolution of decentralization at a regional level (in the example of a particular region of the Czech Republic).

*The largest impact on decentralization in your region was made by (Questionnaire).*

Currently, separate regions experience a variety of problems – socio-economic, administrative, etc. When defining the most common problems in their regions, almost all respondents uniformly selected all available options. Despite this, the most problematic sector appears to be 'communal problems (education, social sector, transport, etc.)'.

*The biggest problems in your region (Questionnaire).*

The efficiency of decentralization is determined within a particular time frame, providing information about the key factors that have an overall effect on decentralization processes. Among the main tools for producing an effect on the extension of a region's autonomy over the past decade, the majority of respondents selected the option 'optimization of the budgetary policy at the regional level'.

*The key tools to increase regional independence for the past decade have been the following (Questionnaire).*

The local political elite are the key-communicators between a region and the central authorities, being responsible for the implementation of reforms and socio-economic development, as well being identified with the regional power. Most respondents regard from 2 to 5 local leaders as regional leaders.

*How many regional leaders can be pointed out in your region (Questionnaire).*

Speaking about the composition of local elites, respondents indicated the most influential local elite representatives in their region to be: the President of the Region, Senators, members of the Regional Assemblies, members of the Regional Council, and independent politicians. It is worth noting that more than half of the respondents named the President of the Region.

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

1. Political factors have traditionally played a significant role in regional governance. The stability and low radicalization level of the local party environment are indispensable components of an efficient decentralization model and its facilitation. In the last regional elections, local party systems were characterised by insignificant ideological delineation, and as a result two polar parties were singled out, namely the centrists ANO-2011 and the Social Democrats or ČSSD. A high level of Euroscepticism in less

affluent regions could pose a potential threat, hence activating the populist activities of ANO-2011, the KSČM Communists, or individual regional leaders.

2. On one hand, the de-bureaucratization and transformation of the public administration system strengthened the Czech Republic's European integration. The country's direct accession to the European Union institutionally ensured decentralization reform, as a number of administrative powers were delegated from the centre to the regions. This can first be seen through authority in the area of profits and expenses allocation and tax regulation. Simultaneously, the high level of fiscal autonomy in the regions, secured by an appropriate system of competences, does not guarantee a consistently high individual budgetary revenue. This can be proved by state transfers to local budgets, which fluctuate at the level of 30–40% (2013–2015).
3. The expert sociological survey conducted illustrates certain characteristic features of the Czech decentralization model:
  - The very concept of decentralization presupposes the delegation of powers from the centre to regions.
  - Most problems in the sphere of decentralization were caused by the economic state of regions, an increase in the financial autonomy of local authorities, and other challenges that occur when reallocating the budget of the country.
  - The current decentralization model proved to be quite efficient, with the level of efficiency being more than 60% (one cannot overlook the role of the EU in the evolution of decentralization, although the democratic principle of the potential extension of decentralization, i.e. interaction between the centre and regions, is in action).
  - The main factor of influence on decentralization has traditionally been the policy of the central power (the 'downward model').
4. The overall success of decentralization in today's Czech Republic is certain to benefit from the ability of the regions to maintain political and financial stability. Having been granted significant responsibilities, local governments must implement reasonable fiscal policies, thereby targeting and reducing state subsidies. The uneven allocation of the country's financial potential poses a considerable problem, differentiating regions into more centralized and decentralized ones.

In late 2019–early 2020 we intend to conduct yet another sociological survey on the topical issues of the development of local democracy in the Czech Republic. We anticipate that the findings obtained will enable us to reveal the dynamics of the operations of the institutions of Czech decentralization.

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## Šiuolaikinės decentralizacijos problemos Čekijos regioniniame lygmenyje: politiniai, administraciniai ir sociologiniai aspektai<sup>6</sup>

Anotacija

Šiame straipsnyje pateikiama lyginamoji šiuolaikinio Čekijos decentralizacijos modelio analizė ir jo instituciniai ypatumai. Lyginamojoje situacijoje autorius nagrinėja administracinius-teritorinius savivaldybių ypatumus, nuosekliai vietos biudžeto sudarymo modelius, Čekijos Respublikos politinės ir partinės sistemos fragmentaciją. Straipsnyje pateikiamos ekspertų išvados, susijusios su šiuolaikinėmis decentralizacijos problemomis. Remdamasis gausiais empiriniais įrodymais (patvirtinta statistika ir ekspertų sociologinės apklausos duomenimis), straipsnio autorius pateikia išvadas apie šiuolaikinio Čekijos decentralizacijos modelio efektyvumą. Straipsnyje teigiama, jog žvelgiant pro politinių klausimų objektyvą regioninėse asamblėjose kyla daugybė konfrontacijų tarp dviejų pagrindinių veikėjų (AN0-2011 ir ČSSD). Autorius pastebi didelę vietos biudžetų priklausomybę nuo valstybės subsidijų, kurios sudaro iki 35–43 procentų. 2017 m. gegužės mėn. atlikta sociologinė apklausa rodo, kad dauguma decentralizacijos problemų kyla dėl netolygaus ekonomikos augimo regionuose ir dėl nepakankamos politinės įtakos decentralizacijos procesams, nes dabartinis decentralizacijos modelio efektyvumas nesiekia daugiau kaip 60 procentų. Atlikto tyrimo išvados atskleistos decentralizacijos problemos ir perspektyvos, teigiama ar neigiama decentralizacijos patirtis Čekijoje gali būti taikoma panašioms institucionalizacijos problemoms ir kitose Vidurio ir Rytų Europos šalyse.

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